



MANAGING ONLINE EDUCATION 2013: PRACTICES IN ENSURING QUALITY

Executive Summary

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The Managing Online Education survey was conducted by WCET (the WICHE Cooperative for Educational Technologies) in partnership with BCcampus, Connecticut Distance Learning Consortium, and eCampusAlberta in the Spring of 2013. The focus of this survey is on practices that promote quality in online education, especially in terms of an institution demonstrating leadership or providing services that enhance faculty and student success. Key findings include:

- **Institutions are Adopting Standards.** More than 85 percent of responding institutions have implemented some form of "standards" or "best practices" in their online courses. The distance education standards from the U.S. regional accrediting agencies have been adopted (either partially or fully) by 58 percent of the respondents, followed by state or provincial standards at 49 percent, and Quality Matters at 42 percent.
- **Course Completion Rates Averaged 3-5 Percent Better for On-Campus Over Online Courses.** When looking at all responses, the difference in course completion rates was three percent in favor of on-campus courses (81% completion for on-campus and 78% for online). When looking only at institutions that provided both on-campus and online completion rates, the difference was 5 percent. With the rise of MOOCs, the issue of course completion has risen in visibility. Coursera, a MOOC provider, reported that only 1 in 20 students "who signed up for a Coursera MOOC earned a credential signifying official completion of the course." Some have confused MOOC completion rates with those of "traditional" online courses. These results show that online course completion rates track more closely with those in of on-campus courses than is found in MOOCs.
- **Institutions Don't Know Their Course Completion Rates.** Institutions had trouble providing course completion rates for both online and on-campus courses. Sixty-five percent were not able to provide an on-campus rate and 55 percent did not report an online rate. If institutions wish to improve course completion, they will need to collect these statistics. It's hard to improve what is not measured.
- **Online Course Content is Developed by Faculty.** Even with the emergence of licensed content by publishers and "open content," 83 percent of respondents said that more the vast majority of their courses use content developed by their own faculty. About 60 percent of institutions use open content, but in only a few courses.
- **Many Institutions Require Faculty Development in Teaching Online and Require Reviews of New Courses.** More than half of institutions (58%) require new online faculty to participate in faculty development prior to teaching their first online courses. About half of new (53 percent) and existing (48 percent) online courses are subject to a required review.

- **Institutions are Providing Academic Support Services at a Distance.** The vast majority of institutions offer library services and advising to online students. Fewer, but still a majority, offer tutoring services.
- **24/7 Technical Services are Not the Norm.** Only about one-third (30 percent) of institutions offer 24/7 technical support for students. Given that students work all hours on online courses, the lack of support could hamper their success in the course.
- **More Assistance for Those with Disabilities Needed.** In meeting the needs of those online students with disabilities, it is alarming that sixteen percent have no policy on this subject and another thirty-six percent rely on the faculty to provide support. Therefore, at least half of the responding institutions have no systematic way to assure that students with disabilities are well-served.
- **Institutions are Working on Curbing Online Academic Cheating.** More than three quarters of institutions have a policy on "academic integrity" (preventing cheating on assessments) for online learners. About 40 percent use technologies to authenticate the identity of online learners.
- **Student Orientations to Online Learning are Rarely Required.** Only about one quarter (22 percent) of respondents require their online students to take an orientation prior to their first online course, even though research suggests that experience aids in online course success.

Institutions with online courses are taking many steps to improve both the instructional and out-of-class experience both for faculty and students. Much effort is spent on adopting and implementing practices that are based on "best practices" developed by local, regional, or national groups.

As is the case with all of higher education, there is room for improvement. Perhaps the needed improvement is not as much as some critics might claim.

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